

EAST BURNHAM

A summary of "Some account of the hamlet of East Burnham (1858)", by Harriet Grote , Kessinger Rare Reprints



Harriet Grote (1792-1878)

This is an interesting book which combines factual history and social commentary, as well as a political manifesto against injustices in the way landed aristocracy might abuse their position. However, Harriet Grote's husband George Grote (1794-1871) was a Liberal MP strongly opposed to Grenville and the Tories, so her account must be seen in that context, and her anger largely surrounds the rather mundane right to cut turf from East Burnham Common, now an integral part of Burnham Beeches.

The Grotes were a banking family and influential in the City. After the Reform Act of 1832, which reformed elections to parliament, the system of patronage of local landowners mentioned in this book was much reduced and George Grote took the opportunity to become MP for the City of London. He and his wife clearly had no particular regard for landed aristocrats and although Harriet railed against the abuses of wealthy landowners and decay caused by elderly landowners losing interest in their properties she was careful to be courteous towards Lady Grenville and directed her anger instead to over-officious stewards. Having said that, her basic thesis of injustice was largely accurate.

EXTRACTS

PAGE 1

The hamlet was known as East Burnham or as Allards or as Hallwards, and at that time included Burnham Beeches and East Burnham Common.

"The land and houses were for centuries the property on one family [the Eyres], the last male member of which died at East Burnham as long ago as the year 1810"

PAGE 2

The railway of 1840 brought many more outsiders to visit Burnham Beeches.

According to legend, Burnham Beeches trees were pollarded in 1645 by the Parliament Army, and the trees still (in 1858) show evidence of this.

Thomas Eyre b.1661 owned the combined Manor of Huntercombe and East Burnham. He lived at Huntercombe House. He had two sons, the elder living respectably but unmarried at Huntercombe, the younger living in East Burnham, having two daughters by his housekeeper and regarded as disreputable by his brother.

The younger son (Charles Eyre) inherited the Manor in 1745, and then passed it to a nephew, Captain Sayer, though the house at East Burnham went to his younger daughter Arabella and her husband Capt John Popple. Huntercombe House was left to the elder daughter Elizabeth who married Mr Coxe. The Manor House at East Burnham was in poor repair, so Capt Sayer lived in a small cottage. Capt Sayer never married.

PAGE 5

Capt Sayer was very lenient on poachers, in fact after dealing with them in court he was known to give them a meal. Game was, in any case, plentiful.

The playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan lived nearby in a cottage about this time.

PAGE 9

So to summarise Mrs Elizabeth Coxe (daughter of Charles Eyre) lived at Huntercombe Manor House, Captain Sayer at a small cottage, and Mrs Arabella Popple lived at another house in East Burnham. The East Burnham Manor House was unoccupied. They were cousins and got on well. Captain Sayer left everything in his will to Captain Popple.

These landlords were all apparently benevolent, though they didn't spend much on the upkeep of their or their tenants' properties.

PAGE 8

Woodcutting and turf cutting on the commons was very liberally done and no-one placed limits on it.

PAGE 10

Capt Sayer died 1810 at the age of 80. Mr Coxe had died around 1795 leaving Elizabeth Coxe to run things. She in turn left the estate to Robert Gordon MP who was a descendant of Mr Coxe by his first wife.

After it came into Robert Gordon's hands he then sold it, with onerous conditions, to Lord Grenville for £54,000 in 1811.

Grenville quickly realised he had taken on a very difficult place, with little or no income, a further drain on his resources, and poor title. In fact Capt Sayer had first left everything to Popple for life, with then a reversion to Robert Gordon's wife for her life, the property only then becoming under Grenville's control.

PAGE 12

Popple cut timber excessively; he had no incentive to do otherwise, and Grenville had to pay him an annual fee to stop. In fact, realising his mistake in overpaying for a property over which he had no control, Grenville was eager for Popple's death, but Popple held on until he died in 1830 aged 80, by which time the estate was falling apart.

Harriet alleges that Grenville had largely bought East Burnham and the rest of his estate to bolster his vote at elections. but The Reform Bills of 1812 and 1820 scuppered that. and he died soon after in 1834 leaving Lady Grenville with a completely dilapidated hamlet.

PAGE 17

In 1837 Mr Gordon had his house pulled down and the materials sold because it was beyond repair, and so too Lady Grenville pulled down the Manor House because it was beyond repair.

"Thus it came to pass that the hamlet of East Burnham which, during perhaps a century, had possessed three opulent families now found itself without either a gentleman or lady resident. The only gentleman's house left standing was that in which Capt Sayer had resided."

PAGE 19

In 1838 the Grotes arrived in East Burnham and bought what had been Mrs Coxe's house and Tomkins Wood and did a land swap with Lady Grenville (leaving her "much the gainer"). By now the Grotes claimed they were the only 'gentlefolk' in the hamlet.

PAGE 20

The cutting of turves on the common became a contentious issue with Harriet at odds with Lady Grenville's deputy steward over how much she could cut. The head steward was in Cornwall so communication was difficult. Mrs Grote was cutting turf not just for heating but also to lay a lawn in her garden!

PAGE 21

There were plenty of hardworking farm labourers in the hamlet but no craftsmen, not even a baker, just one general handyman. However the women made lace by hand until 1844 when machines made them redundant.

PAGE 22

Local cherries were sent by train to Liverpool for sale, and other local berries were sold to Eton schoolboys who apparently had a huge appetite for them.

PAGE 25

Mrs Coxe left £32,660 in her will to certain poor residents, but as this benefit went with the cottages rather than the occupiers the rents on these

cottages simply went up, so only Lady Grenville benefited. Rev Thomas Carter of Burnham interpreted Mrs Coxe's will and bequest quite arbitrarily.

PAGE 27

Harriet asks, 'Why did Lady Grenville let buildings be in such bad repair when rents were so high?' 'Did Lady Grenville have spite against the hamlet because it had such poor returns? 'In 20 years she never visited East Burnham'

PAGE 29

The Crown Inn had been bought by a brewer and allegedly because of the fancy rent they paid to Lady Grenville the locals had to endure poor quality beer.

Burnham Beeches was inundated with pigs from far and wide, let loose to forage.

PAGE 32

The Grottes sold their home in 1853 and erected instead an Elizabethan style house in Popple's Park.

PAGE 35

There was a petition of 1856 claiming the right to unlimited turf cutting but Lady Grenville simply replied that the common was not a 'common of turbary' - turbary being the ancient right to cut turf. Hence, she claimed, her control of turf cutting was absolute.

PAGE 37

No cricket was allowed on Sunday in 1843 subject to a stiff fine of 15 shillings or imprisonment for 6 weeks. The men's only leisure was the Crown Inn, which as mentioned above, was selling poor beer.

PAGE 43

"On the few occasions when I have taken the liberty of communicating directly with her Ladyship she has always shown a polite readiness to

forward my wishes, and an obliging disposition". Harriet says she met Lady Grenville once in person when her ladyship was aged 84.

PAGE 46

The Grotes lived at East Burnham Park until 1858 when Harriet wrote her pamphlet. Her red-brick Elizabethan style house remains to this day.

Harriet then lays out her specific objections to the general principle of landed aristocracy . She also cannot resist telling us that in 1836 Lady Grenville was forced by Burnham Parish Council to repair her roads.

EPILOGUE

Subsequent to 1858, when Harriet wrote her pamphlet -

Lady Grenville died in 1864. She left all her estate to her husband's nephew George Fortescu who had been managing her properties for a decade. She wrote to him once and promised him the inheritance, but said they were completely draining of resources, a fact he was probably all too aware of.

The hamlet had several owners after 1864 when in 1892 it was bought by Sir Harry Veitch (1840-1924) the owner of a chain of nurseries and he built a show garden there. He was a prime mover behind the Chelsea Flower Show. Veitch's garden was in the area bounded by Crow Piece Lane, Farnham Lane, Crown Lane and Allards Road.(ref : Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust)

Burnham Beeches was put up for auction in 1879 when the owner died. It failed to sell, so Sir Henry Peek paid the reserve price of £12000. He then sold 374 acres of this land to the City of London for £6000, retaining 174 acres for himself . Burnham Beeches today has 926 acres in total, about half of which is owned by the City of London. (ref : Wikipedia)

East Burnham Park, the red-brick Elizabethan-style house that Harriet Grote built on Allards Road is still there, and has been owned for many years by Bishop Sport and Leisure Ltd.

Alan Woodley, November 22nd 2024